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ABSTRACT

A 16-month evaluation sponsored by the National Institute of Justice compared the separate and combined impact of two New York City middle school violence prevention programs from February 1993 to June 1994. Project Schools Teaching Options for Peace (S.T.O.P.), a traditional conflict resolution program with a curriculum and peer mediation was offered at all four middle schools studied. The Safe Harbor program, which includes a curriculum, a counseling component, and a schoolwide antiviolence campaign, was offered at three of the four schools. The programs were separately housed at the schools, and students tended to be more involved in one or the other. For this reason, the targeted approach of the school with only Project S.T.O.P. was not compared with the comprehensive approach of the others. Instead, the evaluation focused on assessing the programs individually. Inventories about student experience with violence completed by about 2,000 students, interviews with 72 students and 37 teachers, and school statistics on discipline and violence were used to evaluate the programs. Higher participation in the programs was associated with higher victimization, probably because victimized students sought out these programs. Students who participated in Safe Harbor became less likely to advocate retaliation in response to conflict than students with no exposure. Participation in both programs altered the belief that respect was achieved through violence. Both programs had positive and strong effects on student attitudes and were well received by teachers. (SLD)

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

National Institute of Justice Update

Jeremy Travis, Director

September 1995

Evaluation of Violence Prevention Programs in Middle Schools

Adolescents are at high risk for violent crime. Although they make up only 14 percent of the population age 12 and over, 30 percent of all violent crimes—1.9 million—were committed against them. Because crimes against adolescents are likely to be committed by offenders of the same age (as well as same sex and race), preventing violence among and against adolescents is a twofold challenge. Adolescents are at risk of being both victims and perpetrators of violence.

A 16-month evaluation sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) compared the separate and combined impact of the following two New York City middle school violence prevention programs from February 1993 to June 1994:

- Project S.T.O.P. (Schools Teaching Options for Peace), a traditional conflict resolution program, which included a curriculum and peer mediation.
- The Safe Harbor Program, which included a 20-session curriculum, a counseling component, and a schoolwide anti-violence campaign.

The study showed that students at high risk for personal experiences with and exposure to severe forms of conflict sought participation in these programs. The Project S.T.O.P. program led students to use reasoning more frequently to resolve conflicts, and the Safe Harbor program changed their beliefs in the necessity of violent retaliation.

Methods

Students in the four selected urban middle schools had a great deal of experience with and exposure to violence. At the start of the study, 40 percent of these students stated that they had seen someone shot or stabbed, and 20 percent said that their own lives had been threatened. During an interview one student asserted, "Violence happens in all schools. It doesn't make any difference what school you're in."

In an effort to reduce the violence, School A established Project S.T.O.P. and Schools B, C, and D offered both Project S.T.O.P. and Safe Harbor. The original goal of the evaluation was to assess the combined effects of the programs, as well as the singular impact of each. Project S.T.O.P. was a collaborative effort coordinated by three agencies, and Safe Harbor was coordinated exclusively by the city's Victim Services agency. In addition, both programs were housed separately within each school, and teachers and students tended to be more involved in one program or the other. Therefore, rather than comparing the targeted approach of School A with the "comprehensive approach" of Schools B, C, and D, the evaluation focused on assessing the programs individually.

Data sources for the evaluation included self-reported background inventories on students' experiences with violence, self-administered tests completed by students, semi-structured interviews with 72 students and 37 teachers, and school statistics on disciplinary actions related to fighting and weapons possession. The effects of program participation were evaluated and separate analyses were conducted for the following:

- Attitudes about the acceptability of violence.
- Knowledge of and skills in how to resolve conflict nonviolently.
- Aggressive behavior.
- Use of victim services.
- Number of disciplinary actions taken and cases of weapons possession.

The results were coded so that the higher the score, the more positive and constructive the attitude.

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Results

Relationship between victimization and program use. Higher participation in one or both of the violence prevention programs was associated with higher victimization. This is explained by two factors:

- Some students were referred to the programs because they were victims or perpetrators of violence.
- A significant aspect of Safe Harbor focused on increasing awareness of victimization and providing a "safe place." The program may have specifically attracted students who were victimized.

Attitudes toward retaliation. During the evaluation period, students who participated in the Safe Harbor program were less likely to advocate retaliation in response to conflict than students with no exposure. Students who had a high exposure to Project S.T.O.P. were more knowledgeable about rape and sexual assault and maintained fewer negative attitudes toward rape victims than students with no exposure.

Attitudes toward achieving respect through violence. Participation in both programs also altered the belief that respect was achieved through violence. Students who had moderate to high levels of exposure to Project S.T.O.P. and Safe Harbor scored higher in this area than students who had no exposure. A significant effect of Project S.T.O.P. was a reduction in the feeling of helplessness among students with high levels of program participation.

Use of reason to resolve conflicts. Students who had high levels of exposure to Project S.T.O.P. tended to use reasoning more frequently than students who had no exposure.

Conclusion

Students in urban middle schools are at high risk for personal experiences with and exposure to extreme forms of violence; these experiences are then reflected in the students' own conflict styles and behaviors. The effects of both Project S.T.O.P. and Safe Harbor on attitudes of more than 2,000 middle school students were positive and strong. Many of the teachers noticed how participation in these programs often changed their students' lives. One teacher in School B remarked, "I've seen some rough kids become peer mediators and sometimes it's like a metamorphosis. It completely changes them because they look at things differently...."

A forthcoming Research in Brief, *Evaluation of Violence Prevention Programs in Middle Schools*, by Tanya Bannister of Victim Services, will elaborate on these findings. Contact the National Criminal Justice Reference Service for information: 800–851–3420, or e-mail askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com.

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